

How Mr. Lincoln
Received the News
OF
His First Nomination
BY
CLINTON L. CONKLING

Address before the
Illinois State Historical Society
1909

Reprinted from the Transactions of the
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J. D. CATON, Pres't, Ottawa, Ill.

By Telegraph from
To London.

Don and Ronald
D. D. Nelson

HOW MR. LINCOLN RECEIVED THE NEWS OF HIS FIRST NOMINATION.

By Clinton L. Conkling.

The Republican National convention met in Chicago, May 16, 1860. The interest throughout the country in the results of the meeting was intense. The general opinion, especially in the East, was that William H. Seward of New York would be nominated, although Horace Greeley and others from New York were opposed to him. The Republican State convention on the ninth day of the same month had declared Abraham Lincoln to be the first choice of the Republican party of Illinois for the presidency. Many delegates and politicians thronged the city several days before the convention. Mr. Lincoln's friends were early on the ground working earnestly and effectively to create a sentiment in his favor.

Mr. N. M. Knapp, then of Winchester, Ill., wrote to him from Chicago, as follows:

TREMONT HOUSE.

GAGE, BRO. & DRAKE, PROPRIETORS.

CHICAGO, Monday May 14, 1860.

DEAR SIR—Things are working; keep a good nerve—be not surprised at any result—but I tell you that your chances are not the worst. We have got Seward in the attitude of the representative Republican of the East—you at the West. We are laboring to make you the second choice of all the delegations we can where we cannot make you first choice. We are dealing tenderly with delegates, taking them in detail, and making no fuss. Be not too expectant but rely upon our discretion. Again I say brace your nerves for any result.

Truly your friend,

N. M. KNAPP.

Mr. Lincoln was present at the State convention at Decatur but did not go to Chicago. He remained in Springfield, went to his law office as usual, received reports of the progress of events by telegrams, letters and from persons returning from Chicago, visited his friends to discuss the situation and prospects and, occasionally, as was his wont, joined in a game of hand ball, the then favorite pastime of the professional men of the town.

The only wires into Springfield in 1860 were owned and operated by the Illinois and Mississippi Telegraph Company and were called the "Caton Lines" after Judge John D. Caton of Ottawa, Illinois, president of the company, and one of its organizers. Its principal office was at St. Louis. John James Speed Wilson, afterwards known as "Col. Wilson," was superintendent of the Eastern Division with headquarters at Spring-

field. E. D. L. Sweet was superintendent of the Western Division with his office in Chicago. These divisions were afterwards called the Southern and Northern divisions, respectively.

C. F. McIntire, with an operator named J. B. Pierce, was in charge of the local office in Springfield which was then on the north side of the Public Square (but at what number I have been unable to learn). I have no further information about these operators. A year or two afterwards the telegraph office was moved to the rooms previously occupied by James C. Conkling as law offices, being the second floor over Chatterton's jewelry store, now No. 121 South Fifth Street, on the west side of the Square, where it remained for some years. The first telegraph office in this city was in the second story over Pease's hardware store, now No. 506 East Adams Street on the south side of the square.

Upon the absorption of the Illinois & Mississippi Lines by the Western Union Telegraph Company in 1866, Mr. Sweet was appointed superintendent of the latter company, and upon his resignation in 1868, Colonel Wilson succeeded him and removed to Chicago. He continued in that position until 1879, when he resigned to go into other business. He died a few years afterwards. Mr. E. D. L. Sweet is still living in Chicago at the advanced age of eighty-six years. During the convention he had charge of all the telegraphic arrangements. There was only one wire into the "Wigwam" and this was connected in the main office with the eastern wire of the Western Union—it being the general opinion that the nomination would go to an eastern man, Seward being the one most often mentioned in that respect. Mr. Wilson was in Chicago during the convention and divided his time between the main telegraph office, at the southeast corner of Lake and Clark streets, and the convention in the "Wigwam," a building erected for the occasion at the corner of Market and Lake streets. Most of the personal messages from delegates to Illinois points were sent from the convention hall to the main office of the Caton Company by messenger boys.

On Friday morning, May 18, 1860, the third day of the convention, the delegates met at ten o'clock to ballot. James C. Conkling of Springfield who had been in Chicago several days but was called back unexpectedly, arrived home early that morning. George M. Brinkerhoff, Sr., of this city was reading law in Mr. Conkling's office, which was then over Chatterton's jewelry store. About half past eight o'clock Mr. Lincoln came into the office and asked Mr. Brinkerhoff where Mr. Conkling was, as he had just heard on the street that the latter had returned from Chicago. On being told that Mr. Conkling was not in but probably would be in an hour, Mr. Lincoln said he would go out on the street and come back again as he was anxious to see Mr. Conkling. Presently Mr. Conkling came in and later Mr. Lincoln again called. There was an old settee by the front window on which were several buggy cushions. Mr. Lincoln stretched himself upon this settee, his head on a cushion and his feet over the end of the settee. For a long time they talked about the convention. Mr. Lincoln wanted to know what had been done and what Mr. Conkling had seen and learned and

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J. D. CATON, Pres't, OTTAWA, Ill.

By Telegraph from Chicago 18
To New Orleans

18
1860

Have just commenced
while No 466 necessary to Office 234
divided 834 note not added on motion of
The Board of my the nomination was
made necessary and interest
entirely
J. D. Caton

what he believed would be the result of the convention. Mr. Conkling replied that Mr. Lincoln would be nominated that day; that after the conversations he had had and the information he had gathered in regard to Mr. Seward's candidacy, he was satisfied that Mr. Seward could not be nominated, for he not only had enemies in other states than his own, but he had enemies at home; that if Mr. Seward was not nominated on the first ballot the Pennsylvania delegation and other delegations would immediately go to Mr. Lincoln and he would be nominated.

Mr. Lincoln replied that he hardly thought this could be possible and that in case Mr. Seward was not nominated on the first ballot, it was his judgment that Mr. Chase of Ohio or Mr. Bates of Missouri would be the nominee. They both considered that Mr. Cameron of Pennsylvania stood no chance of nomination. Mr. Conkling in response said that he did not think it was possible to nominate any other one except Mr. Lincoln under the existing conditions because the pro-slavery part of the Republican party then in the convention would not vote for Mr. Chase, who was considered an abolitionist, and the abolition part of the party would not vote for Mr. Bates, because he was from a slave state, and that the only solution of the matter was the nomination of Mr. Lincoln.

After discussing the situation at some length, Mr. Lincoln arose and said, "Well, Conkling, I believe I will go back to my office and practice law." He then left the office.

I was present during a part only of this interview and depend largely for the details of this conversation upon what Mr. Conkling and Mr. Brinkerhoff have told me. In a very few moments after Mr. Lincoln left I learned of his nomination, (just how I do not now remember) and rushed after him. I met him on the west side of the Square before anyone else had told him and to my cry, "Mr. Lincoln you're nominated" he said, "Well, Clinton, then we've got it," and took my outstretched hand in both of his. Then the excited crowds surged around him and I dropped out of sight.

In my possession are five original telegrams received by Mr. Lincoln on the day he was nominated. All are on the Illinois and Mississippi Telegraph Company form.

The first one sent was from the telegraph superintendent Wilson, and shows signs of haste and bears no date. It reads,

"To Lincoln:

"You are nominated."

"J. J. S. Wilson."

Mr. Pierce, the operator who received this message at Springfield, writes from Young America, Illinois, under date of June 4, 1860, to Mr. Lincoln saying that this was the first message for him announcing his nomination.

A moment after this message was sent a messenger boy brought to the main office in Chicago a message addressed simply "Abe" and which read "We did it. Glory to God," "Knapp." The receiving clerk brought the message to Mr. Sweet, calling his attention to the address, and also

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J. D. CATON, Pres't, Ottawa, Ill.

By Telegraph from Chicago

Take dinner.

we did it

of my to find

Amack

65678

78'

78'

to the expression "Glory to God." Mr. Sweet directed that the words "Lincoln, Springfield" be added and that the message be sent at once. This message is probably the first one to Mr. Lincoln from any person who was actively at work in his behalf in the convention and without doubt was from Mr. N. M. Knapp who wrote the letter of May fourteenth.

The next two telegrams are from J. J. Richards who was well known in earlier days in Springfield. He was connected with the Great Western Railroad Company and was its agent for some time at Naples, which was then the end of the road. Owing to the great amount of freight then brought to Naples by boat from St. Louis and other points down the river, and which was there re-shipped to Central Illinois points, the position of agent required a man of good business ability, and for this reason he was stationed there. He subsequently went to Chicago.

These telegrams are as follows:

May 18, 1860.

By Telegraph from Chicago 18 1860.

To Abraham Lincoln:

You'r nominated & elected,

J. J. Richards.

-----18-----

By Telegraph from Chicago 18-----18-----

To Hon. A. Lincoln:

You were nominated on 3rd ballot.

J. J. Richards.

Mr. J. J. S. Wilson followed his first message, probably within a very few moments, by another which reads:

-----18-----

By Telegraph from Chicago 18 1860.

To Hon. A. Lincoln:

Vote just announced, Whole No 466 necessary to choice 234 Lincoln 354 votes not stated on motion of Mr. Evarts of NY the nomination was made unanimous amid intense enthusiasm.

J. J. S. Wilson.

For kindly assistance in compiling this paper I am indebted to Hon. Robert T. Lincoln; Mr. Charles S. Sweet, his Secretary; Mr. John W. Bunn and Mr. George M. Brinkerhoff, Sr.

Also see Williams' Springfield Directory for 1860, p. 42, and the Directory for 1863 under individual names; How Abraham Lincoln Became President, by J. McCan Davis; Illinois State Register, Feb. 13, 1903, p. 8 and the issue of the same paper of Feb. 12, 1909, p. 9, in which T. W. S. Kidd tells what Mr. Lincoln himself told him about where he was when nominated and who first brought him the news.

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